must have got to loathe those rattling ovens, the desert battle-wagons!

None of us felt like walking the ten miles to Ral-al-Khaimah. We decided to invite the Khan Sahib to give us his advice. He at least knew the locality; but to our surprise he had disappeared. We assumed he had designs of his own, and waited patiently in the shade of an old palm tree until he should return. On our left the creek flowed lazily as the tide came in, while to our right lay open fields of clover, divided by plantations of thriving date palms, each about a quarter of an acre in extent, and surrounded by flint-and-mortar walls three feet high. The trees are carefully tended from the first planting, and the plantations contain as many as twenty to thirty deep wells each, from which the water is hand-drawn by means of buckets attached to long ropes.

On some plantations there is a simple, but effective, irrigation system; this consists of channels running at right angles, like the lines on a crossword puzzle. The young plants are placed in the ground between these channels, and are surrounded by low mud walls. This enables the water to collect around the roots in a saucer-shaped depression. The roots penetrate the soil for five or six feet in their search for water, and trees in their prime (about twenty years old) reach a height of thirty feet or more. The bark is composed of the stem-base of the leaves or fronds, which die off each summer. The fruit begins to form in July and the dates are ready for picking in September. They are then packed tightly in boxes and taken by camel or dhow to the merchants for export. Those intended for local consumption are either dried, or else pickled in their own syrup, to which is sometimes added wild honey and ginger, making a delicious concoction.

Herds of cattle were grazing in the fields, watched by young Arab boys; they sang ditties to each other or told stories, a favourite desert pastime. The cattle are very small and anæmic compared with European stock, the largest bull being no larger than a young English heifer. Like the Indian cattle, from which no doubt they are descended, they are hump-backed and have a pathetic *moo-oo* which resembles the cry of a nursery toy cow. The Arab farmers tie the forefeet of their cattle together to prevent them from straying, and their progress when being driven reminded me of a two-legged race.

We had brought a .303 service rifle with us. It had originally belonged to one of our Askhari guards, but he had not looked after

[Ten miles from Ras-al-Khaimah -- Analyst]

006 and pointed out that if we were based there we should have no need of motor-cars. The Khan Sahib tactfully hedged him off this subject, since he realized that I had no desire to commit myself to any statement which the sheikh might construe as an official decision.

622 [471] 245 439 We were on safe ground when we asked him about the date plantations, for the sheikh is one of the largest plantation owners in Oman, and a considerable part of his income is derived from the sale of dates. It appeared that the crop was doing excellently this year, but, owing to the war and the shortage of transport, the demand from foreign countries had dropped considerably. He was, therefore, exporting greater quantities to India and Egypt, although a fair amount was being shipped to South Africa and America. When we told him that people in England had seen very few dates during the war, and that the few which were on sale were rationed, he was very sympathetic. He knew little about English food and, being an Arab, could scarcely imagine how a household could exist without dates.

[262] 578 Praise Allah, he said, they had experienced no drought or plague of insects this year, but they had suffered from raids from the hills. The cursed Shi'hou tribesmen (might they die of plague in their filthy caves!) had been attacking and robbing his labourers, so that they were afraid to enter the plantations except in groups, and he had been obliged to employ armed guards to keep them off. That very morning, he explained, he intended to hold a conference of his nobles to plan a campaign of defence against these marauders. He intended to drive them back into their mountains and inflict such heavy punishment that they would not venture into the plains again for many months. If only he had an aeroplane, he said wryly, he would know how to deal with the Shi'hou! 'Like you do in Afghanistan,' he added with a chuckle.

622 The sheikh, who was a fine-looking old man with a patriarchal, weather-beaten face, had a reputation for being one of the most fearless fighters in Oman, and his feud with Sharjah of ten years ago was still talked about in the desert. Hanging on the wall was a long ceremonial sword, with a chased gold handle; it is said that he had swept off the heads of three men with its blade with a single sweep. He had a face of great power, a tight-lipped mouth, a large hooked nose, and keen grey eyes under shaggy eyebrows. Although few of us understood his language, we all fell under the spell of his strong personality. He was kindly and courteous, but

*[The Sheikh of Ras-al-Kalmah -- Analyst]

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she pleaded that no man had been near her that night. On being questioned, she admitted that she had stopped to gather some *fagar* on the way home, darkness had fallen and she had lost her way. She had spent the night most respectably, sleeping under a neam tree. (To understand this incident, it should be explained that the *fagar* is a kind of edible fungus, much liked by the Arabs, and that in shape it curiously resembles the phallus.)

The trackers employed by the Sheikh of Sharjah were reputed to be the cleverest in Arabia. That afternoon I had gone for a walk to the Sheikh's Wells, a delightful spot about two miles from the fort, whence we obtained our water supply. The area is covered with flower and vegetable gardens, and guarded by one of the round stone watch-towers which one finds on the outskirts of most Arab towns. The Sheikh and his Ministers arrived in a smart Hudson automobile, followed by the Khan Bahadur, Abdur bin Razzak, in his sedan. They were met by two trackers on camels, and proceeded to hold a conference.

Fifteen minutes later the trackers set off for the hospital, picked up the tracks of the raiders, and were soon galloping off in the desert at a smart pace in the direction of Baraimi. This is a small market town in the middle of a trackless desert. The territory is not claimed by any sheikh, although several have tried to possess it. For hundreds of years it has remained neutral ground, and its famous date plantations represent the only example of co-operation among the tribes, for each has a share in the crop. Baraimi is not only a centre for the slave trade, but is a refuge for criminals.

We heard later that the raiders had been traced to Dhaid, but that the trackers had been unable to arrest them. They were in hiding with about a hundred other brigands, and there are limits to the courage of a tracker. Compensation for the thefts was paid to the R.A.F. authorities, and it was a rather curious fact that, several months later, sheets and blankets, bearing the R.A.F. tabs, were found in local houses.

Desert raiders are usually the 'bad boys' of their tribe, and their conduct does not always reflect the character of the tribe as a whole. Some tribes pride themselves on their honesty and deal very sternly with offenders. If a tribesman of the Beni Qitab is caught in the act of stealing or raiding, the Sheikh Mahomed, the patriarch who rules this tribe, will make himself personally responsible for the thief's apprehension and punishment. This may take the form of amputating the right arm, branding, or the more barbarous punish-

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A reservoir at Djaidh, part of the irrigation system for the date plantations

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all the fun that he could out of desert life, yet he worked exceedingly hard and devoted several hours each day to the study of Arabic.

Tandy had been instructed to pay a visit to Djaidh to discuss with the tribal leaders the continuation of work on the wells which irrigate the large date plantations for which this district is famous. Djaidh, which is not a village but a district, lies about fifty miles east of Sharjah on the direct camel route, but the sand tracks are extremely soft for vehicular traffic and Tandy had chosen a circular route by way of Falat-al-'Ali and Muraq-quibat, where the road is reasonably good and has a hard surface. It added twenty miles to the journey, but the extra comfort and ease of travel compensated for this.

I had been invited to join the party, since Captain Tandy had expectations of meeting Sheikh Mahommed bin Ali, ruler of the wild Beni Quitab tribe of Bedouins. I had often expressed a wish to see this chief, whose fierceness and bold character were celebrated in Oman; I never expected to have this privilege, for the Beni Quitab lived in remote and inaccessible parts of the desert, mostly at the foothills of the Jebel-al-Faiyah range, and were continually changing their camping-ground. It was reported, moreover, that they were hostile to foreigners and that Sheikh Mahommed had met only two Europeans, one of them being Sir Geoffrey Prior, the British Resident, who had difficulty in finding him. Arabs are very chary of giving information to foreigners concerning the whereabouts of Bedouin tribes, presumably because they fear reprisals.

Owing to the waterless nature of Oman—which is, geographically, merely a coastal extension of the Great Southern Desert, or Rub-al-Khali—date plantations of any appreciable size are rare. On the Oman Gulf side of the peninsula, and at Muscat, they flourish to such an extent that their export forms one of the staple industries of this part of south-east Arabia, but west of the Shimailiyah the only large plantations are at Falaj-al-'Ali and Djaidh, where their ownership is shared by the tribes in common. Djaidh is neutral territory, but the responsibility for managing the plantations is divided between the Sheikhs of Sharjah and Kalba; the Sheikh of Ras-al-Khaimah is responsible for the plantations at Falaj-al-'Ali, although the Sheikh of Umm-al-Quwain has some interest in this plantation. The district is inhabited by Kalba tribesmen, who live in encampments near the wells; they are responsible, through their headmen or sub-chiefs, for the maintenance of the irrigation

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started to blow, and first 'dust devils', then a great cloud of black sand, began to sweep all round us. The sandwiches were ruined, except those in one carton I had not opened, and our eyes smarted for several minutes. The gale quickly died down and we decided to leave at once; it was nearly midday and we wished to reach Djaidh before the hour of prayer.

As we drew close to Djaidh, the plantations of which we could just see through the haze, the ground became extremely rocky, the track leading over a high steppe, which we estimated to be six hundred feet above sea level; this steppe was strewn with large basalt boulders, some as large as a football, which made steering very difficult. The stones were curiously formed and highly polished, some being striped with white selenite. Williamson, who collected several specimens, told us that there is a certain amount of gold and copper in the mountains here. They are practically unexplored, although a geological survey was made of the Ruus-al-Jibal range recently, the results being published in the Quarterly Journal of the Royal Geological Society. In the passes of these hills are the strongholds of the wild and truculent Shi'hou tribe, some of whom I encountered on my last trip to Ras-al-Khaimah.

The steppe gradually sloped towards a rocky *batah*, a narrow and almost treeless valley, which was in reality a dried-up river bed; the force of the water which flung the boulders down the hillsides must have been tremendous, probably the result of a burst water-shed. Williamson believes it may have occurred several thousand years ago, although in the rain season torrents of water annually wash down from the hills and a wide river flows through a mountain pass from Muraq-quibat to Kalba, where it reaches the sea. After five miles the bed narrowed into a small *wadhi*, which in turn gave way to luxuriant, park-like country, thickly wooded with tall acacias, amongst which we spotted herds of wild black donkeys.

A mile ahead was the date plantation. It was the hour of prayer, so we stopped the car and wandered through the dark, jungle-like paths while Jasim, Sheikh Hamid and the drivers said their devotions. The plantation is cross-sectioned by two wide main paths, with high enclosures of palm-leaf fencing on either side; let into this fence at intervals are little wicket gates, which lead to grass paths of a man's width running between the trees. A 'cover' crop of clover, grass and shrub is cultivated at the roots of the trees, as this

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gives nitrogenous value to the soil. The subterranean channel rises to the surface in the middle of the plantation, where it is collected in a large cement reservoir; from this source the water, carefully controlled in volume, is conveyed by pipes and runnels into narrow ducts constructed at right-angles to the paths. Palm trees are very thirsty and require plenty of water in the hot weather.

A single *Askhari* guarded the plantation, which was noisy with the chatter of brilliantly-plumed birds; for our amusement he climbed a tall palm with the agility of a monkey, using a rope-sling as a support, and dexterously cut a bunch of male flowers for our inspection. The flowers, which have a sickly sweet smell, are tightly packed in a tough protective sheath; these sheaths are sold, when ripe, and used to pollinate the female palms. They are also edible, being very palatable when boiled and eaten with butter sauce. When, a few months later, I passed through Djaidh, the green dates were already forming, and labourers were high in the trees, tying veils of muslin around them to protect them from insects. The dates which are intended for export are gathered when they are light brown, that is, half-ripe, and are often packed with the stalk attached. The Arabs usually prefer them fully ripe, when the colour is dark brown; over-ripe dates are used for the manufacture of syrup which, when crystallized, makes a good brown sugar. Hives are often kept in the vicinity of the plantations and the air was full of their buzzing as we passed through the glades.

Before we reached the encampment we passed the ruins of an old fort. Nothing but the outer shell remained and the gateway had long since lost its magnificent doors; the walls were of rose-pink clay and mortar, and the crumbling tower was crenellated like the ramparts of a mediæval French castle. Sheikh Hamid told us that the fort originally belonged to his grandfather, Sheikh of Kalba, who at one time included Djaidh among his possessions; but a succession of tribal wars had decreased the influence of the Kalba clan and Djaidh had degenerated into neutral ground.

The road to the encampment was a mere body-wide track through tall grass, so high in places that we could not see ahead. Presently two little Arab boys, leading an emaciated bull, greeted us as the truck emerged from this forest and entered a wide, muddy river bed. Here we saw the first of the wells. A gang of labourers was busily letting down baskets into the main channel, while the tribesmen looked on. The headman, a fine-looking old Arab

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system, although the actual excavation and sinking of wells is done by negro slave labour.

The plantations at Djaidh are the largest and cover several hundred acres; the trees are exceptionally fine and tall, and the yield of dates is above average. The water used for their irrigation is drawn from deep natural wells at the foothills of Jebel Faiyah, a dozen miles away, and passes along subterranean channels by gravity flow. All along this route wells have been dug to meet this channel, in order to keep it clear of obstructions, since the walls frequently cave in and the channel becomes blocked with sand and boulders from the river bed. The depth of the channel varies from twenty to fifty feet; it is built on the Persian principle of irrigation and is said to be several hundred years old. Labourers work inside the channel, which is about twenty feet in circumference, shovelling out the loose sand and debris; this is piled into baskets, which are raised to the surface by means of a primitive pulley, which rests on a crude trestle of tree-boughs. Four labourers are employed at each well, two underground and two at the surface.

The work had not been progressing satisfactorily this year and complaints had been made to the Political Officer that the channel was congested and that an insufficient flow of water was reaching the plantations. This was a matter of some concern to the authorities, since, if the plantations were deprived of water there would be a danger of the trees dying, or at least of the fruit withering on the stems. If this occurred, thousands of Arabs would be unemployed in the autumn (the date-picking season), and the price of dates would rise out of all proportion to local incomes, as they would have to be imported from Muscat or Basrah. A great many of the inland tribes derive their livelihood from the seasonal crops, and they are well paid for picking and packing the dates.

We set off shortly after breakfast, in two four-wheel-drive trucks, the party consisting of Captain Tandy, Mr. T. F. Williamson, geologist to the Basrah Petroleum Company, Mr. Jasim bin Muhammed Kadhawi (Residency Agent at Sharjah), myself, and Sheikh Hamid bin Abdulla, a nephew of the Regent of Kalba, who has a dependency or settlement near Djaidh, the tribesmen of which maintain the wells. Owing to the grass-covered dunes and shifting sands of the direct camel route, we took the coastal road through Ajman and Hera as far as Umm-al-Quwain, a distance of thirty miles. Skirting Umm-al-Quwain, which is a small